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**'THEY CAME LIKE A LION' – SARAH
WINNEMUCCA HOPKINS'S LIFE AMONG
THE PIUTES: THEIR WRONGS AND CLAIMS
AS A PERSONAL AND TRIBAL ACCOUNT OF
NATIVE AMERICAN AND EURO AMERICAN
CONTACTS**

Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins is the author of the first personal and communal narrative written by a Native American woman (Ruoff 261). Her *Life Among the Piutes: Their Wrongs and Claims* is believed to be “one of the two or three autobiographies written by Native American women during the nineteenth century” (Wong 134). In contrast to earlier Native American autobiographies of William Apes (Pequot) *Son of the Forest* (1829) and George Copway (Ojibwe) *Life, History, and Travels of Kah-ge-ga-gah-bowh* (1847), Sarah Winnemucca's (Paiute) *Life Among the Piutes* (1883) is not a Christian conversion narrative (Ruoff 261). Instead of spiritual introspection, Winnemucca highlights the emotional, cultural and political consequences of the Native American and Euro American encounters in her life narrative. In order to subvert harmful cultural stereotypes of Native Americans, Winnemucca engages in various discourses circulating in the nineteenth century American society. As a result, her account exhibits a complex hybrid structure revealing her struggle to represent the period of cultural crisis from the perspective of both a Native American woman and a cultural mediator. As she describes mistreatment of the Paiutes by the Euro Americans and her attempts to negotiate between the two conflicted groups, she constructs a tribal self which is not only victimized but also actively resists dispossession and annihilation.

Sarah Winnemucca establishes her authority as the spokesperson of the tribe by invoking her close bond with her grandfather, Truckee, the Paiute leader. Unlike the Native American chiefs featuring in blood-curdling captivity narratives or dime-store novels, Truckee envisioned a peaceful coexistence of his tribe with the white settlers encroaching upon the traditional Paiute land (the areas of present western Nevada and California). Moreover, Truckee encouraged his granddaughter to learn English in order to facilitate the interracial contacts.

Referring to her adult life, Sarah Winnemucca describes her attempts to undo an imminent cultural clash by acting as an interpreter representing her tribe to the white settlers and government officials. In her autobiography, which focuses both on the tribal communal history and on her individual life, Winnemucca continuously undermines stereotypical nineteenth century representations of both Paiutes and white Americans. Although she had a very distinct tribal identity of the daughter of the chief, the woman warrior and the interpreter, as Georgi-Findlay expertly shows in her "Frontiers of Native American Women's Writing," Winnemucca also adopted the romantic pose of "Indian Princess," in order to make her case more appealing to the white audiences (228). At the same time, these strategies of self-fashioning testify to her awareness of the expectations of her white American audience. To resist charges of promiscuity she dissociates herself from the popular image of the "Squaw" and projects a royal image of Native American femininity.

In this way Winnemucca also responds to the charges of her alleged sexual misconduct brought by reservation agents whom she condemned for their mistreatment of her tribe. In a mode similar to slave narratives, Winnemucca's life narrative is framed with the letters attesting to her respectability. Winnemucca frequently subverts the stereotypes of Native Americans as "atrocious savages" and Euro Americans as "benevolent civilizers" by contextualizing the causes of many interracial conflicts over the Paiute land and exposing the corruption within the reservation system. Her descriptions of Paiute tribal and family life, vivid accounts of abuses perpetrated by reservation agents and enumeration of her attempts to negotiate with American government and military officials at times of conflict display her skillful use of oral tradition in her narrative. She frequently recounts the conversations or quotes extensively from her exchanges with government representatives and tribal leaders, presenting herself as a skillful and influential intermediary.

Ironically, Winnemucca's autobiography also shows that her role of a cultural go-between in the times of Euro American expansion made her

vulnerable to being perceived as a “white man’s Indian” by her tribe when the promises of the government officials proved false. She was represented as a stereotypical lascivious “squaw” by the Indian agents, whose frauds she exposed. Winnemucca’s life narrative is both thematically and discursively a unique indigenous account of the profound consequences the American western expansion exerted upon the indigenous community.

Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of double-voiced discourse, Arnold Krupat has convincingly argued that the Native American autobiography often features a “dialogic model of the self” because it is characterized by “original bicultural composite composition” (*Ethnocriticism* 149). This “bicultural composition” does not only apply to the so called “collaborative” Indian life stories written with the help of white scholars (such as ethnographers, anthropologists, historians) or other Euro American writers as in the case of *Black Elk Speaks* by Nicholas Black Elk (Lakota). Black Elk’s spoken life narrative was translated by his son into English then selections were written down by John.G.Neihardt and his daughter (Wong 135). Significantly, Winnemucca’s narrative is a “self-written” autobiography by a Native American woman. The only changes introduced to Winnemucca’s text as described by Mary Mann in the editor’s preface were those concerning orthography and punctuation. Winnemucca’s narrative was published thanks to generous assistance of the white American reformer, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody. The circumstances of this collaboration as well as the implied readers of this autobiography, the white Americans represent Native American and white American perspectives and thus make this narrative into what Krupat called in *For Those Who Come After* “the textual equivalent of the frontier” (11).

Indeed, Winnemucca’s autobiography is a remarkable example of a complex double-voiced discourse focused on representing the intercultural space of the nineteenth century western borderland. Winnemucca records the struggle for survival of the Paiutes, the members of her tribal community, to the Euro American audience in an attempt to exert influence on changing of the reservation system. In this way she recreates the heterogeneous population of western Nevada and multiple interactions on the frontier.

Heteroglossia (dialogism) enters Winnemucca’s life narrative in the first chapter, describing the arrival of the first white settlers into the area inhabited by the Paiutes. Winnemucca’s story begins with establishing an approximate temporal setting which contextualizes the cultural shock she experienced early in her life with the beginning of a great wave of white emigration to this area: “I was born somewhere near 1844, but am

not sure of the precise time. I was a very small child when the first white people came into the country. They came like a lion, yes, like a roaring lion, and have continued so ever since, and I have never forgotten their first coming" (5). Thus the Native American child perceives the coming of the first Christian emigrants as an event of apocalyptic proportions.

Although this description of the first intercultural contact is immediately framed by the story of her grandfather welcoming the white settlers and helping them because of his vision of "long looked for white brothers," whom he believed to be a part of the family separated because of disagreement, the voice of a terrified young Winnemucca narrates the encounters with whites as recurring traumatic experiences. She vividly evokes the sense of terror that Native American women felt on hearing from other tribes that white settlers, who were coming close to their land, were killing everyone and even turned to cannibalism when surprised by winter in the mountains (probably referring to the Donner party of 1846). In a dramatic scene, which Georgi-Findlay described as "an inversion of the pattern of Indian captivity narrative" (232), the voice of a young Winnemucca conveys her mother's desperate attempt to protect her little daughter from frightening white emigrants by burying her in the sand among the bushes:

Oh, what a fright we all got one morning to hear some white people were coming. Everyone ran as best they could. My poor mother was left with my little sister and me. Oh, I never forget it. My poor mother was carrying my little sister on her back, and trying to make me run; but I was so frightened I could not move my feet, and while my poor mother was trying to get me along my aunt overtook us, and she said to my mother; 'Let us bury our girls or we shall be killed and eaten up.' So they went to work and buried us, and told us if we heard any noise not to cry out, for if we did they would surely kill us and eat us. So our mothers buried me and my cousin, planted sage brushes over our faces to keep from burning them, and there we were left all day. (11)

The extreme fear that the coming emigrants inspire makes Sarah's aunt and mother resort to quite a radical solution to ensure safety of their offspring. For Sarah this event is almost like a near death experience. The scene is followed by her emotional appeal to the readers: "Oh can you imagine my feeling buried alive, thinking every minute that I was to be unburied and eaten up by the people that my grandfather loved so much? With my heart throbbing, and not daring to breathe we lay there all day...Oh, can anyone

in this world imagine what were my feelings when I was dug up by my poor mother and father?" (12). By representing the arrival of unrestrained Euro American emigrants from the perspective of a terrified indigenous child, Winnemucca produces a more complicated discourse. She revises in this way the national narrative of westward expansion embedding within it the fears of annihilation experienced by the indigenous population. Winnemucca ironically uses the binary oppositions associated with the frontier: civilized settlers /primitive savages or Christian/pagan. In this way she subverts the racial stereotypes of civilized white settlers and indigenous "atrocious savages."

The initial image of an apocalyptic threat recurs throughout the whole narrative as Winnemucca portrays the numerous ways in which tribal life was disrupted by the arrival of Euro American settlers. These descriptions include violation of legal agreements by white military officials bringing about the charge of Winnemucca's betrayal of her tribe, dismissal from her position as a tribal interpreter and her temporary stay outside the reservation. Furthermore, Winnemucca's life narrative frequently records the violation of native people. For example, Winnemucca reports the story of the abduction and rape of two Paiute girls by the white men, which gave rise to the war in the 1860. The narrative contains numerous references to threats of sexual abuse of indigenous women by white men. Moreover, Winnemucca herself, her sister and her sister-in-law experienced such sexual assaults:

The last time sister and I were on a visit to our people at our old home, just before I was married, we stopped with a white lady named Nichols, at Wadsworth, Nevada ...Someone tried to break through our bedroom door, and my sister cried out to them, saying, "Get away from the door or I will shoot!" ... This is the kind of people, dear reader, that the government sends to teach us at Pyramid Lake Reservation. (94)

Descriptions of the instances of rape or sexual threats were likely to gain sympathy of the white female readers. Euro American women often viewed themselves as moral guardians. Thus references to such unruly behavior of the male "civilizers" could inspire indignation and perhaps effect change.

Significantly, Winnemucca's life narrative diverges from traditional American autobiographies in many respects. The development of her individual self is not highlighted. Her education at Euro American family

and her short a stay at the convent school are only briefly mentioned. Personal details such as her several marriages (two of them to white men) and marital problems are not given much attention. Even the death of her mother and her sister and Winnemucca's period of living outside the reservation in frontier towns is only alluded to incidentally. No turning points in her personal life story are emphasized. Hence her narrative exhibits a fragmentary structure as events from her life are embedded within the tribal events and concerns. In contrast to Anglo-American autobiographies, as the title of Winnemucca's *Life among the Piutes* suggests, she constantly foregrounds her tribal identity – Winnemucca's communal self is frequently shown in relation to others. She records the tribal history, Paiutes' numerous attempts to coexist peacefully with the encroaching white settlers and the military men; she minutely portrays the Paiutes' struggle to survive in the radically changed circumstances. The numerous removals and final enclosure of the Paiutes within the reservation system are carefully depicted. It is worth noting that Winnemucca's personal narrative voice is often effaced as she incorporates remembered dialogues and speeches made by others. Within this history of her tribe she occasionally inserts the examples of her achievement as a Paiute woman warrior, which signals the discourse of the tribal genre of "coup tale" (Brumble 23). Despite sporadic references to her personal feats of bravery, Winnemucca gives priority to tribal perspective throughout her narrative which at times assumes the status ethnographic narrative.

Autoethnographic discourse is in fact one of the important conventions Winnemucca uses in a subversive way. To appreciate the "cultural work" of Winnemucca's narrative it is useful to refer to conceptualization of the cultural space of borderland as it is invoked by Mary Louise Pratt in *Imperial Eyes*. Pratt uses the linguistic concept of the "contact zone" to describe the "space of colonial encounters" (6) which she defines as "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" (4). As Pratt notes "autoethnographic texts" which are written onto the space of colonial encounters "are not ...what are usually thought of as "authentic" or autochthonous forms of self-representation... Rather autoethnography involves partial collaboration with and appropriation of the idioms of the conqueror "(7). Hence the concepts borrowed from the dominant culture are merged with indigenous modes of expression to produce heterogeneous texts. Winnemucca's historicizing discourse on the vindication of her tribe is interrupted in chapter 2, which is focused on ethnographic representation of the Paiutes.

Winnemucca's autoethnographic voice depicts her tribe by describing customs of puberty and courtship rituals, the benevolent upbringing of Paiute children, which she probably knows from lecturing experience to be more acceptable to the white audience. At times she even compares features of Paiutes organization as superior to Euro American political institutions: "We have a republic as well as you. The council- tent is our Congress, and anybody can speak, who has anything to say, women and all." (53) Winnemucca carefully points out that Paiute "women know as much as men do and their advice is often asked" (53) which weighs against Euro American women's lack of political influence over decision-making. In a direct appeal to her implied white readers Winnemucca adds: "If women could go into your Congress I think justice would soon be done to the Indians" (53). She underlines that Paiutes aren't aggressive, don't initiate wars and "never scalped a human being" (54). Moreover Winnemucca refrains from any physical description of Paiute tribal people avoiding the eroticizing effect of typical ethnography.

However, Siobham Senier and Andrew McClure have established that Winnemucca's description of the structure of her tribe is misrepresented. During Chief Truckee's life Paiutes were a loosely connected group of nomadic gathering and hunting people (Senier 113). They did not enjoy much esteem from white emigrants. For example white emigrant women often referred to Paiute Indians as "diggers" because Paiute women often dug for edible roots. In addition to that, due to the warm weather of the Great Basin area and their nomadic life style, Paiutes are said to have lived in grassy shelters wearing very little clothing. Moreover, at the time of the first intercultural contacts with whites, Paiutes are said to have had no tribal structure that included the position of chief. Hence it seems that Winnemucca's maternal grandfather, introduced by her to the readers as the Chief of Paiutes at the beginning of her narrative, may have just enjoyed the status of an important leader of the group. Therefore it seems that Winnemucca's autoethnographic project involved some revisions of white conventions in order to make it into a more persuasive petition against the reservation system. In an attempt to make her crusade against mistreatment and dispossession of the Paiutes more acceptable, Winnemucca participated actively in re-inventing the ethnic identity of her tribe and herself for the white readers. Furthermore, by using such modes as sentimental appeal foregrounding emotional complexity of indigenous population and by adapting some of the tribal conventions of oral tradition, featuring dramatic descriptions of feats of bravery, Winnemucca constructs her narrative self not only as a

victim of American western politics but also as a resisting inventive and adaptable agent in the intercultural space of American frontier.

Winnemucca does not only refer to autoethnographic discourse or appeal to the feelings of her readers. The traumatic experiences of Paiute community caused by cultural and military clashes are frequently represented in dramatic scenes, rendered through indirect speech and dialogues which display Winnemucca's skillful use of oral tradition. Her dialogized narrative thus constitutes a vivid recreation the Paiute and Euro American enforced contacts during the second half of the nineteenth century.

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